

# *Japan's Kickboxing - A condensed History*

By Kid McCoy

Because the Martial Arts are ancient, and because Japan is one of the places that western people most often associate with them, there is a perception that Kickboxing itself has deep roots there. While this is partially true in terms of the precursory steps, much of what we see practiced today is largely a modern invention borrowed from Muay Thai and western Boxing, so far as Japan's contributions are concerned.

At the very root, the evolutionary seed of "Kickboxing" outside of Thailand and Burma began in the fifth century BC when Bodhidharma (known as "Daruma" in Japan), an Indian Buddhist monk, arrived from India at Shaolin-si, or "small forest temple", in China for the purpose of teaching Zen Buddhism.

In addition to Buddhism, Bodhidharma also introduced exercises designed to strengthen the mind and body, which marked the beginning of the Shaolin style of martial arts in China.

The art of karate came to Japan from Okinawa, where hand-to-hand combat had to be developed to a "fine art" because the occupational government there had banned the use or ownership of weapons.

In 1609 Japan invaded Okinawa. They took the island's ruler hostage back to Japan and set up a police force on the island which imposed strict rule. To prevent uprising, the Japanese confiscated all weapons.

Okinawa, however, lies between Japan and China, and Okinawan traders in ancient times frequently traveled to China's Fukien Province and brought back the fighting styles of China's southern Shaolin temple.

Since the islanders had no weapons, their hands had to become their "weapons", and they would toughen their knuckles and elbows on straw pads and wet sand, and later on wooden pads. Over time, the Okinawan natives developed such an effective unarmed self-defense system that many Japanese wanted it as their own. However, Karate was not actually brought to the Japanese

mainland until 1921 where it quickly became the best known Japanese martial art. Though most of K-1's participants are from outside of Japan and particularly Europe (Less so in the case of the Middleweight Max promotions), the events are extremely popular there and have showcased Japan's best present day Kickboxing fighters such as Masaaki Satake, Masato Kobayashi, Akio Mori (Musashi), Yusuke Fujimoto, Kazuya Yasuhiro, Akeomi Nitta, Yoshihiro Sato, Shingo Koyashu, Takayuki Kohiruimaki, Tsuyoshi Nakasako, Masashi Suzuki, Kozo Takeda, Tatsufumi Tomihira, Hiromi Amada, Hiroki Shishido, Keiji Ozaki, Tatsuji, Ryushi Yanagisawa and Nobuaki Kakuda.

Some excellent fighters who are active from Japan in Muay Thai rings include Hiroki Ishii, Daiki out of the JMC Yokohama Gym, Kazuya Maskai, Noboru Uchida and Toshio Matsumoto.

As of this writing, MMA is slightly on the decline in Japan, but both Boxing and Kickboxing are thriving, and Masato Kobayashi, among the best Kickboxers under modified Muay Thai rules at Middleweight in history, is a national hero there.

Japan's history in Kickboxing draws from numerous sources both from within and from outside Japan, and they take their Kickboxing very seriously, and may well be the best place on earth to make a good living at it.

Before "Karate" came to Japan, the popular Japanese fighting systems were Ken-jitsu and Ju jitsu. Gichin Funakoshi, commonly referred to as Shoto, or 'waving pines' is the original inventor of "Karate".

He was born in 1868 on Okinawa, and grew up learning the Okinawan unarmed system of "Te" from the locally renowned master named Azato. He later became a school teacher on the island and he was permitted to teach martial arts as a class in school, and soon enough, "Te" was being taught in schools all over Okinawa.

In 1912, Funakoshi's art became something that sparked curiosity Japan, when the Imperial Navy fleet visited Okinawa and saw Funakoshi demonstrate his art.

By 1921, the Crown-Prince Hirohito, had long listened to accounts of Funakoshi's art and was impressed enough about news of the Okinawan art that the following year, in 1922, he instructed Dr. Jano Kano, the founder of the Japanese art of Judo to invite Funakoshi to demonstrate the art

at the famous Kodokan Dojo.

So impressed was Hirohito that he asked Funakoshi to teach his art in Japan and within five years he had become well known in Japan and opened his own training school in Tokyo.

The school was called Shotokan, or “Shoto's hall”, and the art was later renamed karate-do, which means "way of the empty hand".

Over the next half century, sub-styles of the same art developed that include a multitude of styles such as Chinto-Ryu, Chito-Ryu, Doshinkan, Gohaku-Kai, Goju-Ryu (Kanzen), Goju-Ryu (Okinawan), Goju-Ryu (Meibukan), Gosoku-Ryu, Isshin-Ryu, Kanshin Ryu Kenseido, Koei-Kan, Kyokushinkai, Kyu Shin Ryu, Motobu-Ryu, Okinawan Kempo, Ryokukai, Ryukyu Kempo, Sanzyu-Ryu, Seido, Seidokan, Seishin-Ryu, Itosu-Kai, Seishinkai, Kofukan, Matsumura, Shorinji Kempo, Shorinji-Ryu, Shotokan, Shotoshinkai, Shudokai, Shuri-Ryu, Washin-Ryu, Yoseikan and many others.

But the conversion of unarmed martial systems to ring sports requires a two step process. The first is the elimination of maiming, or “unsportsmanlike” elements of the art that find no purchase in non-lethal combat, and the second is to weed out components that simply don’t work very well, which can only be done in repeated, full contact contests of trial and error.

Because most eastern based arts have strong ties to tradition, the latter process invariably reveals that bad techniques which became tradition exist in the practice, and these have to be rooted out. In the west, weaponry was permitted in most cultures through history, and as such, the need to replace them with weaponless war tactics is less evident than in the east, and therefore the line between weapons for war and sport oriented fighting techniques was drawn with greater clarity. This allowed western boxing and wrestling to be developed strictly as a ‘ring sport’ along more practical, workable and proven lines, with popularity as a standard social practice during the Greek Olympiad at Olympia in 776 BC, declining after the fall of Rome around A.D. 476, and re-emerging as a spectator sport toward the end of the 17th century, first in England, and shortly after in Ireland, France, Holland, Italy and Germany.

In Thailand, the ancient art of Muay Thai (The common term used today for a range of provincial arts) had undergone extensive exposure to western boxing beginning in the late 19th century.

This exposure purged out wild flailing and replaced it with footwork, distancing, blocking and clean punches that were highly developed in England, and coupled this with the simple Thai Roundhouse and rear leg kicks, knee and elbow strikes well known to the Thai art, giving birth to modern Muay Thai as a spectator sport.

But in Japan, there was great concern that their native art be made to work better than that which was practiced in Thailand.

By the middle of the 20th century, the four principal forms of Japanese Karate included Goju-ryu developed out of Naha-te, with it's its popularity due to the success of Kanryo Higaonna, Shito-ryu, founded by Kenwa Mabuni in 1928 and was influenced Naha-te and Shuri-te, Wado-ryu, founded in 1939 as system of karate derived from jujitsu and karate by Hienori Otsuka, and of course Shotokan, founded by the aforementioned Gichin Funakoshi in Tokyo, considered to be the founder of modern karate.

The birth of 'Japanese Kickboxing' started in 1950 when Thai fans criticized Japan's Karateka on their speed, strength and the overall practicality of their Kata based postures.

Early, post world war II cross-style matches showed that the finest Goju-ryu, Shito-ryu, and Shotokan fighters in the nation were being devastated by Muay Thai fighters, who seemed able to take advantage of the ponderous glitches found in nearly all of the traditional arts.

Eventually, a powerful Japanese businessman, Karateka and Boxing promoter, Osamu Noguchi was fed up by Japanese martial arts being constantly criticized during his frequent visits to Bangkok. Noguchi became enraged by the taunting that he took from his Thai counterparts regarding the "weakness of Karate" and decided to do something about it, in order to make the Thais "eat their words".

Western Boxing had thrived in many parts of Asia, including Japan even before the invention of modern Karate, and although the Thai art derived great benefits from it's exposure to Boxing resulting in the construction of the first indoor fight stadiums there, Noguchi had hoped to concoct a counter to Thailand's ring fighters using an art that had a more direct relationship to a purely

Japanese art.

His initial efforts, however, met with humiliation and disaster, as Thai opponents would overwhelm the stiff, predictable Katateka fighters with relative ease, thus forcing Noguchi to tap his boxing resources to infuse a more fluid ring generalship into his hybrid fighters.

The result of these efforts eventually required the need to incorporate more and more Boxing and less Karate training, which mirrored the experiences of North American Martial arts fighters only a few years later, but ultimately, Noguchi was forced to acknowledge the need to “Do as the Thai’s do” in terms of fighter training and method relating to the kicks.

Noguchi and partner Kenji Kurosaki, a Kyokushin Karate instructor, studied Muay Thai extensively and had their fighters do the same, and developed a proprietary “system” which Noguchi named “Kick Boxing”.

Kurosaki had been a student of Kyokushinkai Mas Oyama and owned the first 'Mejiro Gym' in Japan. Kurosaki would ultimately produce legendary Japanese kickboxers like Toshio Fujiwara, Mitsuo Shima, and later, Dutchman Jan Plas who would go on to open the highly respected 'Mejiro Gym' in Holland, bringing Muay Thai to Europe.

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At first, throws and head butts allowed in their new sport of “Kickboxing”, primarily to help to distinguish it from Muay Thai, but this was changed almost immediately, and the All-Japan Kickboxing Association was founded a short while later to control and promote the new sport.

By the 1960’s a number of quality fighters emerged from this process that would ultimately gain the respect of the fighters from Thailand over the course of time, and more importantly, create a unique new permutation of Japan’s martial arts history in the form of a fighting sport that they could call their own.

Still, Japanese and Thai fighters were matched under a variety of rules into the 60’s, with Thais winning far more than loosing, and to press matters even more for Japan’s fighting pride, French

Savate champion Christian Guillaume did a six week tour of Japan resulting in 5 wins in 5 fights with noted Japanese Kickboxers. The Savate expert proved that La Boxe Francaise, or Savate was not in any way inferior to the Eastern methods, and he punctuated his point by winning 3 of his 5 mixed bouts by knockout, 2 of KO's in the first round.

But in early 1966, three fairly good Muay Thai stadium fighters were brought over to Japan to fight against 3 Japanese Kickboxers from Oyama dojo, and Japan finally won a series against Thai fighters, by a score of 2 to 1.

Kickboxing boomed after that, and was soon popular in enough in Japan to be broadcasted on national T.V.

Among these first prominent fighters from Japan was Tadashi Sawamura (Born Hideki Shiraha in Manchuria, China in 1943) who debuted as a professional kickboxer on April 11, 1966. Through his career he compiled a reported record of 232-5-4 before retiring on October 10, 1977 at the age of 34. He was legendary in Japan for his effective use of a devastating finishing move he called "The Jumping Vacuum Knee".

So popular was Sawamura to the public, that Kickboxing nearly died out in Japan after he retired, and was not seen again on TV until K-1 was founded in 1993, a 16 year span.

Another superstar of the peak period was Toshio Fujiwara, born in 1948, Fujiwara became the first ever non-Thai stadium champion in 1978 when he won the lightweight title at Rajadamnern Stadium. He won a reported 123 and lost 18 before retiring at age 35 in 1980.

"Farangs", or foreigners who fight for stadium titles in Thailand are rare, but Hitoshi Ogasawara and Kozo Takeda who came from Japan, (in addition to Murad Sali from France, and Ramon Dekker from Holland) would follow Fujiwara's legacy in this regard.

Tadashi Sawamura was a junior lightweight (130 lbs) former Karateka who learned how to knock his opponents out with powerful knee kicks borrowed from the Thais after Kickboxing for 5 years

earlier.

Another later kickboxer of reknown was Tomofumi Murata, who was known to fans as Caesar Takeshi, who went on to found the offshoot, San Shou like sport of Shoot Boxing.

By the early 1970's there would be several Japan based Kickboxing authorities, including the World Kick Boxing Association, and the Shin Kakuto Jutsu (New Fighting Arts) association, which was formed by Kenji Kurosaki who left All-Japan after American Kickboxer Benny Urquidez defeated Japanese champion Katsuyuki Suzuki.

Kurosaki felt the 2 minute round was closer to the real street fighting and adopted the use of the 2 minute time limit in his promotions and called it the "Shin Kakuto Jutsu rule".

He also he changed the name of his gym from 'Mejiro', named after the Mejiro Ward in Tokyo, to the Kurosaki Dojo.

The international fusing of Kickboxing took another step on November 5th, 1971, when an American named Ray Elder defeated Japan's Toshiya Furuya to become the first non-Asian to win the Japanese Middleweight Kickboxing title. That fight was at the Nippon Budokan in Tokyo in front of 9,000 fans. In March of 1970, Elder had gone to Thailand to train at the famous Sri Sothorn Camp and in May of that year fought at Radgdamnern Stadium against 5th ranked Muay Thai middleweight Mahahchai Tacharom and won the bout with ease (Noting here that 90% of all Thai fighters were Featherweight and below). Returning to Japan the now over confident Elder met with just modest success going 5 for 8 until his next fight in Thailand in November 1970, when he met Radgdamnern Stadium Middleweight Champion Daenthai Ittichit and lost by close decision.

Elder was known for using his left jab, having a good ability to block kicks and being proficient on the inside with the use of the knees. He could bulk up to 193 lbs. and there was talk of bringing him back to the U.S. from his adopted home of Japan to fight contemporary Heavyweight kickboxing "Champion" Joe Lewis, who had been criticized (particularly by the Boxing community) for fighting mostly guys who did not know how to fight much at all, but that match never happened.

By 1972 Kickboxing had soared in popularity in Japan to become, for a brief period at least, the number one most watched televised sport, overtaking Boxing, and weekly programming was available on 3 channels.

This was also the year that Japan finally pulled nearly up to snuff with their Thai counterparts in the ability to produce punch/kick ring warriors.

The biggest Thailand vs. Japan event to date occurred that year in Bangkok when Japan's Featherweight Kickboxing Champion Mitsuo Shima, changed the course of history at Kittikachorn Stadium by beating the national Muay Thai Champion and finally winning a major crown for Japan.

These championships were designed to challenge the world under Muay Thai rules and stylists from South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Burma, Laos and Cambodia and France were all invited to compete, but the event turned out to be another Thailand versus Japan affair.

The evening started off with harsh lesson in reality for Japan, as most others before had been. Thai Flyweight Champion Detsupan Hollywood beat his Japanese rival Toshiro Harukawa with the Thai capturing the bout with a punch in round 2.

Next, Thai Lightweight Champion Saenchai Srisompop met Toshio Fujiwara, the extremely popular Japanese title holder of the same division. The Thai dropped the Japanese superstar in the first round and opened a cut on his right eyebrow in the 2nd. Fujiwara mounted a vicious assault of leg kicks in the 3rd and 4th, pulling well ahead in the bout but the Thai came alive in the following round, forcing the ring doctor to stop it.

Next, Japanese star Mammoth Okada battled Thai Champion Yodsingh Sawpayathai, with the Thai once again scoring a KO.

Next, Thailand's Junior Lightweight Champion Taweechai Lurdchon, the amazing Ratchadamnern



stadium champion had little trouble dropping Japan's "Flying Jaguar".

Next up, Japan's Junior Welter champ Go Yokoyama met the great Sornnakrob Kiatvayupak. Yokoyama had been one of the fighters from Japan sent to Thailand some time before to learn the art at the Muangsurin Camp, where his instructor was none other than champion Sornnakrob Kiatvayupak. After 2 years and 22 fights Yokoyama was the Japanese "World Champion", but it wasn't enough to match the King's Cup legend and the Thai won on points.

Next, Bantamweight champions Daenthai Kiatvayupaka and Noboru Osawa met for the unified crown, and again the win went to the Thai.

The final and main event for the historic evening featured the legendary Samyan Singsornthong against Japan's Mitsuo Shima.

In a fight that is remembered as one of the most important in global Kickboxing history, Shima used his Boxing experience to outscore the Thai legend with superior punching over the first two rounds, flooring the Lumpinee champion and nearly taking him out. In the 3rd, however, the Thai king regained control of the match with his superb kicking, but by the 4th round Singsornthong was beginning to show the wear and tear being brought upon him, with blood streaming from his nose and mouth.

The two best examples of Muay Thai and Kickboxing finished the final round of the epic on even terms, but the decision was never in doubt.

The unanimous decision went to Shima without any question, and it was only the 2nd time in 21 mixed contests that occurred that year that a Japanese Kickboxer had beaten a Muay Thai fighter, and this time it was done at the highest level.

Kickboxing continued as a major sport in Japan for the next several years, often on par with Boxing, which enjoyed the advantage of a longer history in Japanese culture.

By the end of the 70's, prior to Urquidez's first visit to Japan, the overall popularity of Kickboxing in Japan was slowly declining and promoters were losing money.

Urquidez's arrival in Japan gave the sport a 'world-sport' flavor like Boxing, and shot new life into

the sport until 1981, when a major scandal erupted that linked Kickboxing promoters to organized crime.

Kickboxing lost public favor quickly after that, and the WKBA and the Katogi Kick Boxing League dissolved. The original All-Japan Kickboxing Association was forced to merge with the American based WKA, and kickboxing in Japan was forced to fully adopt the “American rules”, which only served to purge Muay Thai techniques out of the sport.

During the 1980's the WKA was Japan's only remaining sanctioning body, and fans tuned their attentions back to international Boxing.

In the early 1990's several new organizations were founded in Japan to give the WKA some competition, but it was the efforts of Seidokan Karate master Kazuyoshi Ishii that truly revitalised Kickboxing in Japan, with the 1993 establishment of the K-1 fight organization, which stages huge, costly spectacles showcasing fights under modified Muay Thai rules, and more recently, promoting matches under grappling inclusive Mixed Martial Arts rules.

For full contact, kicking allowed stand-up fights, K-1 offers the most money for fighters in history, but only at or above the 70.5kg (155lb) weight range.

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